

1400 South 19th Avenue
Bozeman, MT 59718

3 August 2004

To: Governor's Office, Todd O'Hair, State Capitol, Room 204, P.O. Box 200801, Helena, MT 59620-0801
Environmental Quality Council, State Capitol, Room 106, P.O. Box 201704, Helena, MT 59620-1704
Dept. of Environmental Quality, Metcalf Building, P.O. Box 200901, Helena, MT 59620-0901
Dept. of Natural Resources & Conservation, P.O. Box 201601, Helena, MT 59620-1601
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:

Director's Office

Parks Division

Lands Section

FWP Commissioners

Fisheries Division

Legal Unit

Wildlife Division

Design & Construction

MT Historical Society, State Historic Preservation Office, P.O. Box 201202, Helena, MT 59620-1202

MT State Parks Association, P.O. Box 699, Billings, MT 59103

MT State Library, 1515 E. Sixth Ave., P.O. Box 201800, Helena, MT 59620

James Jensen, Montana Environmental Information Center, P.O. Box 1184, Helena, MT 59624

Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council, P.O. Box 595, Helena, MT 59624

George Ochenski, P.O. Box 689, Helena, MT 59624

Jerry DiMarco, P.O. Box 1571, Bozeman, MT 59771

Montana Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175, Helena, MT 59624

Wayne Hurst, P.O. Box 728, Libby, MT 59923

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The enclosed Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared for the proposed Poison Lake Westslope Cutthroat Trout Introduction. This project proposes to establish and maintain, by periodic stocking, a sport fishery composed of native westslope cutthroat trout in a currently fishless lake on school trust land administered by Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). Poison Lake is located in the Tendoy Mountains southwest of Dillon, Montana in the Medicine Lodge Creek drainage. This introduction would also be part of a program, which will evaluate the performance of stocked westslope cutthroat trout in lakes previously managed for nonnative Yellowstone cutthroat trout.

This draft EA is available for review in Helena at FWP's Headquarters, the State Library, and the Environmental Quality Council. It also may be obtained from FWP at the address provided above, or viewed on FWP's Internet website: www.fwp.state.mt.us

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks invites you to comment on the attached proposal. The public comment period

will be from August 4, 2004 to 5:00 pm, September 2, 2004. Comments should be sent to the following:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
c/o Poison Lake Project
730 N. Montana St.
Dillon, MT 59725

Or e-mailed to: fishfwpdillon@7pks.com

Sincerely,

1400 South 19th Avenue
Bozeman, MT 59718

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

PART 1. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

Project Title: Poison Lake Westslope Cutthroat Trout Introduction

Application Date: July 2004

Name, Address and Phone Number: Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks, Region 3
1400 S. 19th Ave.
Bozeman, MT 59718-5496
(406) 994-4042

Project Location: Beaverhead County in the Deer Creek drainage of the Tendoy Mountains
(T11S, R11W, SW ¼ Section 26) - The lower (westerly) Poison Lake
(See Attachment A – available by request at (406) 994-4042)

Description of Project: The Department proposes to introduce native westslope cutthroat trout into lower Poison Lake in order to provide for a location to research the performance of westslope cutthroat trout in mountain lake environments of southwest Montana and to provide a sport fishery in a currently fishless lake environment. Westslope cutthroat trout are native to the streams of the Tendoy Mountains and are presently found in Kate and Muddy Creeks. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) would continue to manage Poison Lake as a stocked fishery with regular plants of westslope cutthroat trout on a four-year basis. Fish stocked into Poison Lake would be progeny from the captive westslope cutthroat trout broodstock at FWP's Washoe Park Hatchery in Anaconda. The westslope cutthroat trout evaluation of Poison Lake would be a component of a research project under which 8 other southwest Montana mountain lakes, that are currently managed via stocking of the nonnative Yellowstone strain of cutthroat trout, will be converted to plants of the native westslope cutthroat trout by 2006 and evaluated. Local oral history and photographs (Paul Hansen, Ned Wellborn, John Brozovich) indicate that an unauthorized stocked sport fishery for rainbow trout existed sporadically in past years in Poison Lake. The intent of this project is to provide a legally managed sport fishery for native cutthroat trout in the lake. Currently, no mountain lake sport fisheries are found in the Tendoy Mountain Range.

Lower Poison Lake does not appear to provide sufficient habitat for natural reproduction of stocked cutthroat trout likely necessitating a regular stocking program similar to many of the mountain lakes of southwest Montana. The 4.1-acre lake does appear to provide ample habitat to support a fish population with depths plunging rapidly from the shoreline, dropping to a maximum of 43 feet. A 2002 sounding of Poison Lake revealed a steep basin morphometry with little littoral component and an average depth of 31.2 feet across 2 perpendicular transects. Upon cursory observation, macroinvertebrate and zooplankton communities appeared abundant, diverse, and typical of high altitude lentic environments in southwest Montana. Experimental gill nets set overnight in June 2004 confirmed the absence of fish in Poison Lake at this time.

Two amphibian surveys in June 2004 failed to reveal the presence of amphibians in either of the two Poison Lakes. Amphibian sampling of numerous sites in the proximity of Poison Lakes (Bryce Maxell, U of M) revealed the presence of two Columbian spotted frogs while similar

sampling in nearby Kate Creek revealed 8 collections of spotted frog. The spotted frogs inhabit Kate Creek in sympatry with native westslope cutthroat trout, as is the case in many of the area streams.

Alternatives to Proposed Action: This Environmental Assessment considered two additional alternatives to the Proposed Action. These 3 alternatives include:

Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative). The proposed action to establish a stocked sport fishery of native westslope cutthroat trout in Poison Lake via a regularly scheduled stocking program.

Alternate Fish Stocking Program. Stock and maintain a sport fishery through the use of another species or strain of salmonid. This alternative would utilize other popular sport species such as the McBride Yellowstone cutthroat or Eagle Lake rainbow trout to provide for a sport fishery through regular stocking.

No Action Alternative. Poison Lake would not be stocked with any kind of trout and the lake would remain as is, in a fishless state.

Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction:

Poison Lake is located on school trust land administered by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). DNRC is supportive of FWP efforts to establish a sport fishery in Poison Lake, particularly if the sport fishery is based on the use and evaluation of a native species such as westslope cutthroat trout. DNRC views the proposal as being consistent with the cooperative effort between DNRC and FWP to enhance recreational opportunities on school trust lands. FWP has also discussed the proposed action with the grazing permittee on the school trust property, Paul Hansen of Den Han Ranch, Inc., and found him to be highly supportive of the proposed action. Mr. Hansen further stated that public access to the lake could be gained via Den Han Ranch property to the west.

Regarding public access to the lake, FWP has contacted the Dillon Field Office of BLM and the DNRC Dillon Unit Manager in order to confirm that public access is available to Poison Lake. Public access is readily available, via two-track road, from Muddy Creek to the east ridgetop above the lake. Continued access to the lake is pedestrian across approximately 1/2 mile of DNRC administered land.

FWP has also contacted and received support for this project from the Skyline Sportsman's Club of Butte at one of their regularly scheduled monthly meetings and has also apprised the FWP Commission of the project through the direct involvement of Tim Mulligan, the southwest Montana Commissioner.

PART 2. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

Table 1. Potential impact on physical environment.

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources				X		X
2. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats			X			X
3. Introduction of new species into an area				X		X
4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality				X		
5. Water quality, quantity and distribution (surface or groundwater)				X		
6. Existing water right or reservation				X		
7. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture				X		
8. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		
9. Historical and archaeological sites				X		
10. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy				X		
11. Aesthetics			X			X

Comments

(A description of potentially significant, or unknown, impacts and potential alternatives for mitigation must be provided.)

- 1). Mountain lakes with fisheries habitats that do not currently support fisheries represent a relatively limited environment at present. The introduction of fish, particularly the native westslope cutthroat trout, should not result in any permanent alteration of the lake environment, but would result in an expansion in the distribution of the species in the Tendoy Mountains.
- 2). The introduction of fish into the Poison Lake environment could result in seasonal shifts in the distribution and/or abundance of some macroinvertebrate or zooplankton species, particularly species preferred as food sources by westslope cutthroat trout. The introduction should have no significant affect on amphibian populations since the only amphibian known to occupy the area is the Columbian Spotted Frog, which is known to cohabit lentic and lotic habitats with westslope cutthroat trout.
- 3). The introduction of westslope cutthroat trout into Poison Lake would represent the first official stocking of that species into the lake. The westslope cutthroat trout, however is endemic to the Tendoy Mountains and its surrounding stream and river drainages. Westslope cutthroat trout are currently found in Kate and Muddy Creeks to the south of Poison Lake. Thus, the westslope cutthroat trout is native to and currently is found in the aquatic habitats of the Tendoy Mountains. The lack of a surface discharge from Poison Lake will prevent potential genetic exchange between the stocked and nearby resident fish.
- 11). The introduction of westslope cutthroat trout into the Poison Lake environment would increase species diversity in the system and provide a wildlife component for observation or for sport fishing that is currently not found in a lacustrine habitat in the Tendoy mountains.

Table 2. Potential impacts on human environment.

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Social structures and cultural diversity				X		
2. Changes in existing public benefits provided by wildlife populations and/or habitat			X			X
3. Local and state tax base and tax revenue			X			X
4. Agricultural production				X		
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity and distribution of community and personal income				X		
7. Access to and quality of recreational activities			X			X
8. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals (ordinances)				X		X
9. Distribution and density of population and housing				X		
10. Demands for government services			X			X
11. Industrial and/or commercial activity				X		

Comments

(A description of potentially significant, or unknown, impacts and potential alternatives for mitigation must be provided as comments.)

- 2). The proposed action would provide for a viable sport fishery in an environment that currently does not support one.
- 3). The proposed action would be consistent with DNRC recreational use fee assessment for sport fishing on state school trust lands and would represent part of the statewide program which generates school trust funding from DNRC administered lands and programs.
- 7) The proposed action would generate a minor increase in sport fishing opportunity in the Tendoy Mountain Range and provide a type of recreational opportunity that currently does not exist there.
- 8) The proposed action is consistent with the cooperative effort of FWP and DNRC to enhance recreational opportunity on school trust lands.
- 10) The proposed action would require additional fisheries management efforts in the form of biological sampling to evaluate the performance of westslope cutthroat trout in Poison Lake and regularly scheduled hatchery plants on a four-year basis. The introduction of a sport fishery in Poison Lake could also result in some additional enforcement patrol effort by FWP.

Does the proposed action involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely

harmful if they were to occur?

The proposed action should not result in any risks or adverse effects. Minor shifts in macroinvertebrate or zooplankton populations that might occur as a result of stocking of westslope cutthroat trout should be reversed if stocking of the species ceased. Because the lake has no surface discharge, no effects of the action should be transferred to downslope stream drainages.

Does the proposed action have impacts that are individually minor, but cumulatively significant or potentially significant?

Because the proposed action is dependant upon regular stocking from the FWP hatchery system, and, because the action is limited to Poison Lake by lack of surface discharge, no cumulative impacts are anticipated.

Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives (including the no action alternative) to the proposed action when alternatives are reasonably available and prudent to consider. Include discussion of how the alternatives would be implemented:

- 1). The Proposed Action. (Preferred Alternative). The proposed action would result in the ability to establish and evaluate westslope cutthroat trout performance in a southwest Montana mountain lake environment, many of which are currently managed with the nonnative Yellowstone strain of cutthroat trout. The project would also result in the establishment of a recreational sport fishery where one currently does not exist on state school trust lands with ample public access. This action is supported by area sportsmen, the DNRC, and the grazing permittee.
- 2). Alternate Sport Stocking. This alternative would forego the native species component and seek to establish a sport fishery in Poison Lake via the stocking of nonnative Yellowstone cutthroat trout or Eagle Lake rainbow trout. This alternative would not result in native species performance evaluation and would utilize species not endemic to the Tendoy Mountains. While this alternative could successfully establish and maintain a sport fishery in the lake, it is not supported by the DNRC Dillon Unit Manager.
- 3). No Action Alternative. This alternative would forgo the establishment and maintenance of a native species based sport fishery in Poison Lake and leave the lake in a fishless state. The research and esoteric values of fishless lakes in mountain environments have been recognized in land management planning alternatives. Under this alternative, recreational use on the specific school trust parcel would largely be limited to sport hunting. Also, under this alternative, some risk of illegal fish introduction might occur as individuals recognize the lake's potential to support a sport fishery and attempt to take fisheries management into their own hands.

The department's authority/responsibility to undertake the proposed action is provided in Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Statute as follows:

87-1-201 (Temporary) Powers and duties.

(9) (a) The department shall implement programs that:

(i) manage wildlife, fish, game, and nongame animals in a manner that prevents the need for listing under 87-5-107 or under the federal Endangered Species Act, 16 U.S.C. 1531, et seq.;

(ii) manage listed species, sensitive species, or a species that is a potential candidate for listing under 87-5-107 or under the federal Endangered Species Act, 16 U.S.C. 1531, et seq., in a manner that assists in the maintenance or recovery of those species;

The department recognizes that there would be minor impacts to the Den Han Ranch (which supports the project and has offered to allow some public access through their property) but no other impacts to any private landowners are anticipated.

Because there are no potentially significant impacts of this project as proposed, an EA is the appropriate level of environmental review under MEPA.

EA prepared by: Richard A. Oswald, MFWP Region 3 Fisheries

Date Completed: August 3, 2004

Email address for comments: fishfwpdillon@7pks.com

Mail comments to: Richard Oswald
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
730 N. Montana St.
Dillon, MT 59725

Comments due by: September 2, 2004